A Synopsis of the Dissertation "The Realist Dilemma and Postmodernist Experimentation: A Study in the Novels of Iris Murdoch"

For a number of reasons, Iris Murdoch is of special interest in the history of late twentieth century novel. A prolific novelist, playwright, theorist, moral philosopher in the manner of Plato, Murdoch stands out as a champion of realism in the age of metafiction. This naturally invites us to explore her work in the light of her own philosophical and aesthetic theories. However, her theorizations are not to be seen as extensions of her novels or vice versa. Yet, an in-depth study will throw much light on the ambiguities and contradictions that exist in her novels. The critic, John Haffenden, notes that many readers of Murdoch have at once been excited and exasperated by her fiction. Critical opinion on various aspects of her writing is widely divergent. But they all agree on the paradoxical, ambiguous, ambivalent and indeterminate nature of the novels. An attempt to study the philosophical and aesthetic ideas in comparison with her fiction would challenge any scholar by the sheer massiveness of the work involved. Murdoch was an experimenter with ideas and fictional forms throughout her career. She stands in a niche of her own articulating the concerns of a culture in transformation.

This dissertation attempts to investigate some of the critical problems relating to Murdoch's fictional oeuvre in relation to her theoretical pronouncements and philosophical ideas. It examines her Realism, Postmodernism, Philosophical ideas, the Post -Christian cultural dilemmas, and the aesthetic and moral issues of her times. A

key concern of this enquiry is the apparent contradiction that exists in her rational theorizations side by side with the non-rational practice in art. The focus is on Murdoch's interactions with the contemporary philosophical and literary worlds. A close analysis of her works reveals the creative dilemma that Murdoch the thinker and writer faced. Her adoption of various ideological and aesthetic positions caused her to be described variously as a realist, a postmodernist, a highbrow philosophical novelist or a lowbrow comic melodramatist and so on. Each description can be justified yet is inadequate to encompass the whole.

Murdoch dealt with mostly the London upper-class intelligentsia, the "Murdoch land" of her novels, which becomes a microcosm of the larger world of the post War II Western culture. Her novels show how she tried to engage the moral, aesthetic and cultural issues of the postmodern world in her own way within this setting. She began under the influence of continental existentialism in the 1950s, but soon shifted to novel writing, though continuing to engage in philosophy, constantly evolving through her knowledge of Wittgenstein and maturing into a vision as a Platonic philosopher. Her first novel, *Under the Net* (1954), described as a "philosophical comedy," displays her playful engagement with Sartrean existentialism with strong echoes of the Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy. Wittgenstein and Sartre provided the ideological framework for postmodernism and its aesthetic predispositions.

Though historically a postmodernist, Murdoch did not seem to belong there much. Metaphysics, theology, moral and aesthetic philosophy dominated her thought from the very beginning. She gave voice to the moral and metaphysical concerns of the Post-Christian world in search of a new God and a moral vision that it yearns for. This is clear in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1967). Her training as a philosopher sets her apart from conventional British novelists in that even as she adopts the narrative methods and motifs from popular and serious fiction, she imposes her philosophical vision upon them. The major issue in Murdoch criticism is the tension that exists between Murdoch the discursive philosopher and Murdoch the story teller. A recurrent concern in her novels is the problem of language itself–an issue that she inherited from Wittgenstein and Sartre. The novelist is the practitioner of the linguistic art. Language is the only medium available to the novelist. The novelist attempts to circumvent its limitations by using that same medium to suggest, symbolize or allegorize a reality that eludes language. It is perhaps here that Murdoch's philosophical ideas interface with her literary art. Murdoch can be described as an eclectic philosopher who assimilated Western and Eastern religio-philosophical ideas without ever totally committing herself to any. Her claims to being a Platonist and realist have to be understood in this way.

Murdoch rejected modernism and postmodernism on grounds of their inability to present the real world. It is possible to trace a pattern of thought evolution that links her novels with the philosophical writings. Murdoch's writing expresses an attempt to escape from a sense of artistic inauthenticity which she found in contemporary

culture. Murdoch is a novelist who "celebrates imperfection." A recurrent motif of her works is that life is a big "muddle." It is the source of her comic vision.

After the Introduction, the second chapter examines the distinctive features of Murdoch as a realist, based on her theorizations in "Against Dryness" and elsewhere, where she is seen turning away from the contemporary fictional modes, which she describes as "either crystalline or journalistic." Though Murdoch tried to return novel to its old moorings, in 19th century realism, she would not fit easily into the category of traditional realists. In many ways she departs from its familiar conventions of plot, character and themes. This has called forth epithets such as "transcendental realism" and "metaphysical novel." The 19th century realism is *representational realism* involving the Enlightenment philosophy. Murdoch's novels do not share this. Her novels strain the boundaries of probability and verisimilitude. Her manipulation of characters suggests the breakdown of structural narrative codes that have unmasked the cultural condition of Post-War Europe. They engage us differently from those of the modernists and metafictionalists in that they are not abstractions. Yet she is not entirely averse to the strategies of postmodernist metafiction.

The third chapter discusses the postmodernist elements in her works. Between Murdoch's theory and practice of fiction there is an interesting contradiction. The point is that Murdoch, though she prescribes classic realism, more or less unproblematically in theory, questions it implicitly in her fiction. Written at a time when postmodernism dominated the cultural field, her novels can be easily classified,

but the classification is superficial since the term postmodernism itself is problematic. The playful element of self- reflexivity, use of multiple perspectives, deliberate mixing of genres and the influence of linguistic philosophy are signs of a postmodern temperament. This necessitates a detailed examination of Murdoch as a philosophical novelist.

Murdoch has always denied being a philosophical novelist and has clarified why she does not consider herself that way. But this does not mean that she lacks philosophical depth. Moral and religious concerns lie at the core of her vision and emerge throughout her works. The appearance of philosophers and artists and the occasional direct discussions of philosophical issues reveal how the novelist handles philosophy in fiction. This is what is discussed in Chapter four.

The fifth chapter deals with the problem of faith. Her characters are haunted and troubled by the loss of traditional faith. Some of them are both politically and metaphysically displaced. The presence of renegade priests, nuns, atheistic philosophers and clergymen dramatizes these issues. Through them the novelist explores alternative modes of religious perception and grounds for morality. Apart from a fascination with Buddhist ideals, Murdoch moves more and more towards Platonism, combining it with Simone Weil's notion of (loving) 'attention.'

Art facilitates mystical experience and moral vision. To Murdoch, all arts and intellectual labour help in the process of moral growth. Murdoch saw painting as a sort of explanatory metaphor for the other arts. Aesthetic experience implies both art

and nature, providing sources for moral transformation. Murdoch's method can be described as *ekphrastic*. Artists, literary figures and intellectuals people the pages of Murdoch's novels. Many significant moments of moral growth occur while the characters experience art. In her earlier novels art is highlighted as the moral agency; in later novels this is more and more replaced by Nature. Life-threatening encounters with natural forces serve to initiate moral rebirth in the characters. This is what is dealt with in Chapter Six.

Murdoch studies have grown and branched out since her death, providing newer insights into Murdoch's work from the point of view of feminism, Christian theology, linguistic philosophy and culture studies. Even medical researchers have been interested in her work on account of the celebrated case of Alzheimer's that she fell victim to. This dissertation attempts to understand those aspects of Murdoch's work that highlight the inevitable contradictions and unresolved conflicts that characterize a phase of western civilization.